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LETTER DATED 26 MAY 1998 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF ERITREA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Subsequent to our two previous communications dated 14 and 19 May 1998 concerning the border crisis between Eritrea and Ethiopia, I have the honour to attach a document entitled "Basic facts on the present tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia", issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea on 23 May 1998 in Asmara.

This document articulates the genesis of the border conflict that has developed into a crisis between my country, Eritrea, and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, which has terribly saddened my Government.

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate the present letter, its annex and the enclosure as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Haile MENKERIOS
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

Annex

Basic facts on the present tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia

1. The present crisis in the relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia was triggered on 6 May 1997 by an unprovoked Ethiopian armed attack on Eritrean troops in south-western Eritrea. The fighting that ensued resulted in Eritrea bringing under its control the large swaths of its south-western territory that Ethiopia had been occupying. Eritrean troops involved in the fighting stopped at Eritrea's borders and did not infringe on Ethiopian territory.

2. The unprovoked attack of 6 May was the latest in a long string of violations by Ethiopia of Eritrean territory and sovereignty as well as of the understanding between the two countries to maintain the status quo on the borders pending a final agreement. Since these are too numerous to catalogue here, we will confine ourselves to the more recent and significant transgressions. Ten months ago, in July 1997, Ethiopian troops occupied the Adi Murug area of Bada, in eastern Eritrea, dismantled the Eritrean administration there and installed a new Ethiopian administration. A few days later, Ethiopian authorities forcibly evicted Eritrean farmers from villages in the vicinity of Badme in south-western Eritrea, saying that they had demarcated the area as Ethiopian territory. Eritrea protested to the Ethiopian Government asking it to reverse those infringements, carried out by force, but the Ethiopian authorities, who had created new facts on the ground, refused to heed Eritrea's call. These incursions have since continued, resulting in Ethiopian occupation of large tracts of land, particularly in south-western Eritrea.

3. The Ethiopian incursions were not isolated actions, as the Eritrean Government had initially thought. Indeed, they were part of an overall plan decided on at the highest levels to bring under Ethiopian control large swathes of Eritrean land that Ethiopia claimed. An official Ethiopian map of the Tigray region of Ethiopia (published in 1997), shows Ethiopian territorial ambitions inside the clearly demarcated international, colonial borders of Eritrea. (See attached map.)

4. Eritrea has not been fixated on the issue of its borders with Ethiopia. Firstly, Eritrea's borders with Ethiopia are among the most clearly defined colonial boundaries and Eritrea is confident that, if the need arises, it can secure its rights to its borders through peaceful and legal means. Secondly, in the light of the good relations that have existed between the two neighbours and their avowed objective of promoting regional integration, the Eritrean Government has believed that the issue of borders is of secondary significance and should not be allowed to obstruct the development of bilateral and regional cooperation. Consequently, Eritrea has consistently worked to resolve the tension arising from border issues quietly, peacefully and, as much as possible, bilaterally. It did not go public when Ethiopian troops occupied the Adi Murug area of Bada and forcibly evicted farmers from the Badme area, razing their dwellings and farms to the ground. It did not issue ultimatums or threaten all-out war, as the Ethiopian Government has now done. It simply called for the formation of a joint committee to resolve the issue on the basis of the international, colonial borders between the two countries. Eritrea's restraint,

however, only encouraged the Ethiopian authorities, who might have misinterpreted it for weakness or lack of resolve, to push on with their flagrant violations of Eritrean sovereignty.

5. In light of the above, Ethiopia's reaction to the more recent developments has been inexplicable and extremely dangerous. It has threatened war unless Eritrea withdraws unconditionally from territories it legitimately brought back under its control. Virtually the entire Ethiopian army has been brought to Eritrea's borders. Meanwhile, the Ethiopian media is waging an inflammatory campaign, inciting hatred and confrontation. In a flashback to the old regime, calls are being made daily to "crush and annihilate the invading Eritrean army". Consistent with the war psychosis it is creating, Ethiopia has stopped Ethiopian airlines flights to Eritrea and the use of Eritrean ports, through which 90 per cent of its trade used to pass.

6. In a bid to justify its extremist and dangerous position, the Ethiopian Government has blown the situation out of all proportion and has resorted to a distortion of the issues and facts. It has centred its campaign on Badme, as if there are no other areas of tension. It has totally ignored the unprovoked attack of 6 May and the previous violations of Eritrean territory. The Ethiopian Foreign Minister went as far as alleging that the borders between the two countries are not delimited and demarcated and then went on to contradict himself by insisting that Eritrea had violated Ethiopian sovereignty in these same not delimited and demarcated areas.

7. The Ethiopian authorities have also intimated that the present difficulties are linked to the differences between the two countries over trade. There is absolutely no basis to these insinuations. While Eritrea, adopting a long-term perspective, had favoured more open trade and closer economic ties, the new arrangements preferred by the Ethiopian Government have not harmed the Eritrean economy in any way. Indeed they have come as a blessing in disguise, as they have unleased new initiatives and entrepreneurship in the Eritrean economy. It is also worth mentioning that the conjecture contained in press reports that the fighting might be linked to mineral deposits in the area where the incident has taken place is totally unfounded.

8. In stark contrast to the Ethiopian approach, Eritrea has responsibly striven to defuse the situation and pave a way for a peaceful, lasting solution. It has called for the renunciation of the use of force. It has also proposed the demilitarization of all areas of current tension and the resolution of the issue through the involvement of a third party and on the basis of respect for the international and colonial boundaries. The above points are incorporated in the following five-point proposal presented by the Eritrean Government on 14 May 1998:

> The Government of Eritrea condemns the logic of force as it firmly knows and upholds that border disputes of any kind can only be resolved through peaceful and legal means; and not through military means.

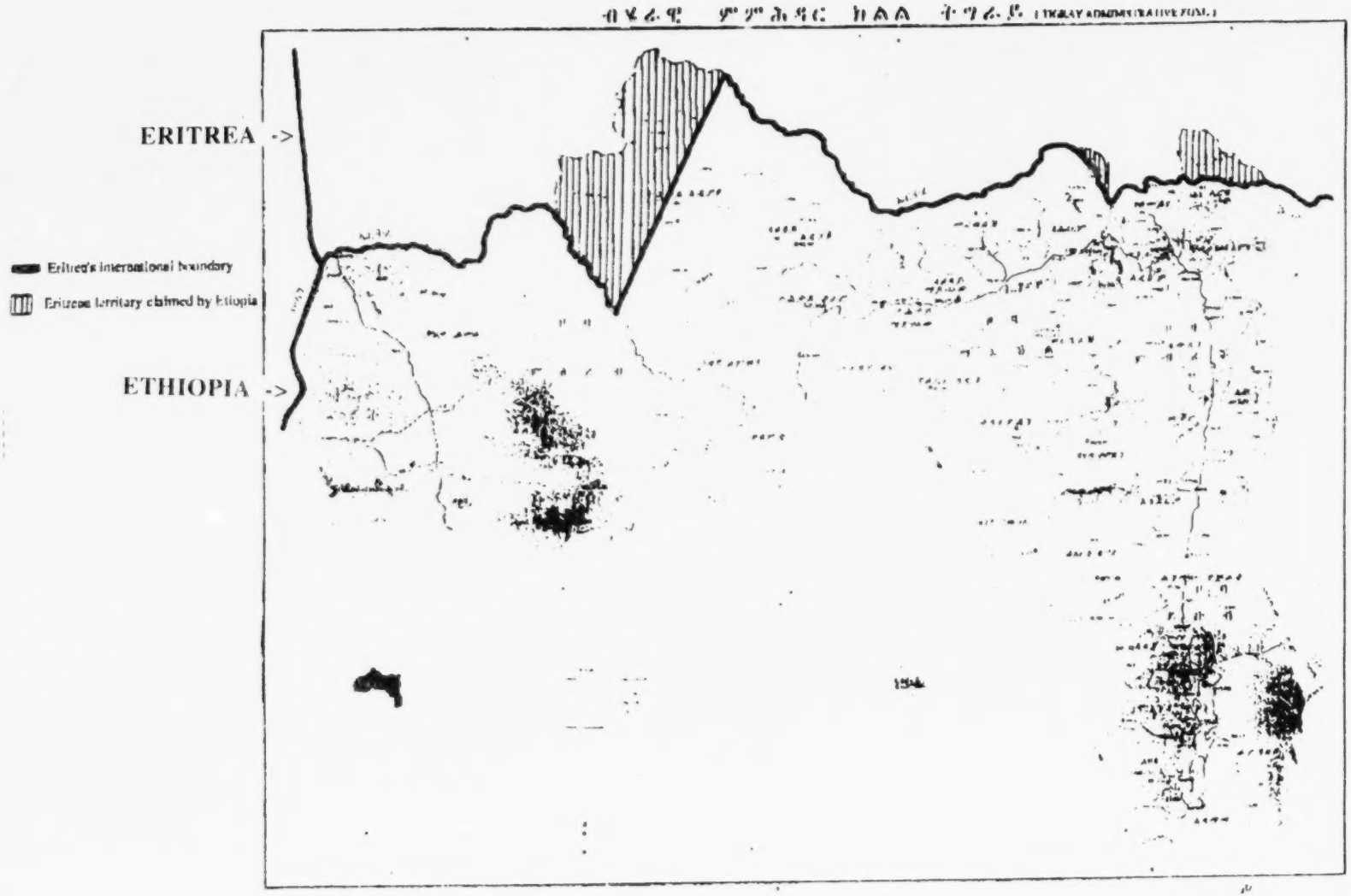
On the basis of this principle, each party shall publicly announce to the peoples of Eritrea, Ethiopia and the international community the territories that it claims - if any - and designate them on the political map with clear geographical coordinates. Each party shall also accept that the dispute cannot, and should not, be resolved by force, but through peaceful negotiations.

Both parties shall agree that all negotiations and understandings shall be carried out in the presence and through the mediation of a third party. The latter will act as witness and guarantor.

Areas under "dispute" shall be demilitarized temporarily and be free from the presence of armies of both countries. The enforcement of this understanding shall be guaranteed by the third party.

If the above proposal for resolving the dispute through the involvement of a third party and without complications is not acceptable, the matter shall be referred to international adjudication.

9. The Eritrean Government has welcomed and cooperated without reservation with the initiatives undertaken by friends and concerned parties to defuse the crisis and to facilitate a lasting solution. It will continue to do so until the problem is resolved.


ERITREA ->
ETHIOPIA ->
Eritrea's international boundary
Eritrean territary claimed by Ethiopia